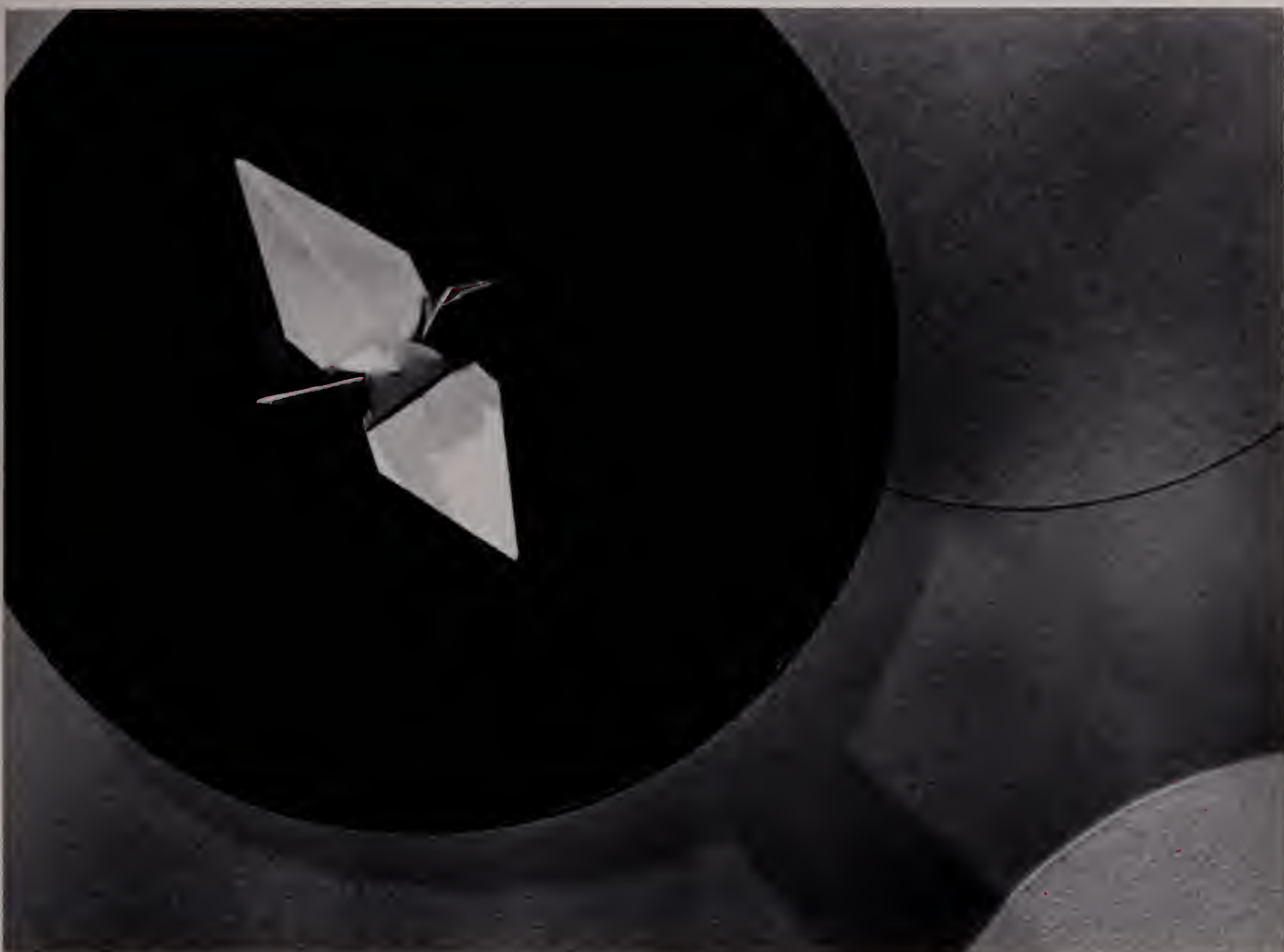


Japanese Photography in America



1920-1940



A. Kono *Perpetual Motion*, 1931

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September 8–November 2, 1988

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans of Japanese descent—most of whom were United States citizens living on the Pacific coast—were forced to leave their homes and businesses for inland relocation camps, where they spent the war years in confinement. Amid the haste and hysteria of relocation, many of their possessions were abandoned, lost, or destroyed—among them, many art photographs created by the Japanese-Americans themselves.

Beginning in the 1920s, so many Japanese immigrants took up the hobby of art photography that they formed large camera clubs, particularly in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. The photographs they produced were exhibited in international competitions and published worldwide in nearly every book and magazine of popular photography. Their work became so prominent that in 1928 the editor of *The American Annual of Photography* wrote: “the influence of this group on our Pacific coast has put a lasting mark on photography in this country, the repercussions of which are echoing throughout the world.”¹

The publications and salons which included the work of Japanese-Americans formed part of the tradition known as Pictorial photography, a style which began in the late nineteenth century as an attempt to elevate the relatively new medium of photography to the level of fine art. In this quest, photographers chose the romantic themes typical of popular painting, such as pastoral views and harbor scenes, often expressing through them a longing for a distant, or imagined, time or place. Soft-focus lenses were used to veil the subject in a haze of atmosphere, negatives were retouched so that a scene might appear more picturesque, and printing techniques were devised to mimic fine art etchings.

Japanese photographers in America worked within the Pictorial tradition by blending its techniques and concern for beauty with a unique visual style. They stressed pattern, tone, and line, all elements characteristic of the Japanese art they knew best through their familiarity with Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. The rhythm of the haiku verse, the precision of the tea ceremony, the “just so” design of flower arranging—all of the arts and crafts dear to the Japanese became the basis for their photographic style.

Dr. Kyo Koike, the leader of the Seattle club, suggested to his fellow Japanese-Americans in *Photo-Era* magazine: “we must be the best interpreters for both

nations, because we are not free of Japanese ideas, and yet at the same time we understand Western ways.”² The blend Dr. Koike recommended, and the style which resulted, found an audience that went beyond the circle of Pictorial photographers. For example, the Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy included Shigemi Uyeda’s photograph of water on an oil ditch in his landmark book of 1938, *The New Vision*.³

The Japanese decorative style emphasized bold geometric shapes and patterns and shadows on two-dimensional backdrops, such as a flat wall. Alternatively, to accomplish the same effect on a larger scale, a photographer would assume an aerial viewpoint by tilting his camera downward, causing the horizon line to lift up out of the picture. As in Kentaro Nakamura’s “Evening Wave”, this allowed the photographer to defeat the camera’s insistence on Western linear perspective.

Water in its various attitudes was the favored subject of Japanese-Americans. The play of light on ripples and the undercurrents of shadows provided the opportunity to create striking visual effects. By contrast, the photographers rarely focused on people; when people were included, it was usually as a mere accent to the composition.

Many of the most unforgettable photographs were taken in Los Angeles, mostly by members of the Japanese Camera Pictorialists of California. Undoubtedly intrinsic to the group’s initial success was their commitment to fine craftsmanship. One member tells of working under the tutelage of the club’s master teacher, Kaye Shimojima, for three years before finally achieving a photograph that Shimojima found satisfactory. So good was the finished print that it was accepted in every competition in which it was entered. Regrettably, no copy of the photograph is known to exist today.

Among those photographs that do survive are a surprising number of abstractions. One might ask how an immigrant working in the cultural backwater that was Los Angeles of the 1920s could have gotten the notion that abstract images were appropriate for photography. The answer lies partly in the influence of Edward Weston and his early “Cubist” photographs. Toyo Miyatake, one of the area’s most prominent photographers, arranged four showings of Weston’s work in Little Tokyo beginning in 1921. Weston’s photographs of attic angles, seen in these exhibitions, inspired many angular “designs” by the

Japanese, including Miyatake. And Weston's photographs of still-life arrangements encouraged the Los Angeles Japanese to further explore that subject.

Perhaps the finest still-life photographs were those done by Hiromu Kira. His arrangements are exquisite studies in placement. In the paper bird series, a folded crane animates an otherwise two-dimensional space that is European (often Art Deco) in character, while the subject remains true to its Oriental heritage. This series perfectly combines East and West, thereby accomplishing the very blend called for by Dr. Koike.

This chapter in the history of photography, which began with such vitality, ended sadly and abruptly with the onset of World War II. In the years following the war, Japanese-Americans reestablished their lives with remarkable assurance, but the more practical needs of finding a place to live and work precluded the continuation of their old hobby. The desire to express themselves in photography was apparently lost, along with many photographs, in the bitter experience of relocation.

DENNIS REED
Exhibition Curator

NOTES

1. Frank R. Fraprie, ed., "Our Illustrations," *The American Annual of Photography* (Boston: American Photographic Publishing Co., 1928), p. 136.
2. Dr. Kyo Koike, "The Seattle Camera Club," *Photo-Era*, 55 (October 1925), p. 182.
3. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1938), p. 47.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width.

K. Asaishi

The Books, c. 1926
Bromide (?). $7\frac{3}{16} \times 9$
Collection of Kango Takamura

H. Fukuyama

Rising Green, c. 1932
Toned bromide, $13\frac{5}{16} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of the Itani Family

Akira Furukawa

Untitled (Paper Rolls), c. 1927
Toned bromide, $11\frac{5}{16} \times 9\frac{5}{8}$
Private collection

Untitled (Faucets, Beaker, Mortar and Pestle), c. 1930
Bromoil, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{15}{16}$
Collection of Tom Jacobson

Untitled (Workmen), c. 1930
Bromoil, $10\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of Tom Jacobson

Ichiro Itani

The Curve, 1928
Gold-toned bromide, $9\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{7}{8}$
Collection of the Itani Family

Beach, 1930
Toned bromide, $11 \times 10\frac{11}{16}$
Collection of the Itani Family

Eel Fisherman, 1932
Toned bromide, $10\frac{9}{16} \times 15\frac{5}{8}$
Collection of the Itani Family

Riso Itano

Ebb Tide, c. 1925
Toned bromide, $10\frac{11}{16} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$
Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Fund

Shinsaku Izumi

The Shadow, c. 1931
Toned bromide, $10\frac{3}{8} \times 13\frac{3}{8}$
Private collection

Tunnel of Night, c. 1931
Toned bromide, 13½ x 10⅛
Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Fund

Untitled (Four People on Beach), c. 1931
Toned bromide, 7⅞ x 9⅝
Collection of Setsuyo Asari

H.S. Kaito

The Tubs, c. 1928
Bromide, 6⅞ x 8⅛
Private collection

Ryoji Kako

Untitled (Fence and Bush in Snow), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 12⅞ x 10¼
Collection of Frances Nishibayashi

Untitled (Twigs in Snow), c. 1930
Bromide, 10⅞ x 13⅝
Collection of Frances Nishibayashi

Hisao E. Kimura

Ayumi, c. 1929
Toned bromide, 13⅞ x 10⅛
Collection of Sadao Kimura

The Speed Boat, c. 1931
Toned bromide, 10⅞ x 13¾
Private collection

Afternoon, c. 1933
Toned bromide, 12⅞ x 10⅞
Collection of Sadao Kimura

Hiromu Kira

Shade and Shadows, 1925
Toned bromide, 9⅓ x 11⅞
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

Water Plants—Decoration, 1926
Toned bromide, 9⅞ x 11⅝
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

An Arrangement, 1927
Toned bromide, 12 x 9¾
Private collection

Paper Bird, 1927
Toned bromide, 15¼ x 10⅞
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

Study in Paper, 1927
Bromide, 12½ x 10¼
Private collection

Study—Paperwork, 1927
Toned bromide, 12⅞ x 9⅝
Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Fund

Glasses, 1928
Toned bromide, 10⅜ x 12⅝
Private collection

Glassware, 1928
Toned bromide, 11⅞ x 10⅞
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

Study in Design, 1928
Toned bromide, 13¼ x 9¾
Private collection

Circles Plus Triangles, c. 1928
Toned bromide, 13⅞ x 9⅓
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

Curves (also Glass Circles), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 8⅞
Collection of Audrey and Sydney M. Irmas

Pottery, c. 1930
Toned bromide, 10¼ x 12¼
Private collection

The Thinker, c. 1930
Toned bromide, 10¼ x 13¼
Collection of Kango Takamura

Dr. Kyo Koike

Looking Down Emmons Glacier, c. 1925
Toned bromide, 11⅞ x 7⅞
Collection of Hiromu Kira

Summer Breeze, c. 1925
Toned bromide, 8⅜ x 12
Collection of Patrick Suyama

Whispering, c. 1925
Bromide, 5⅓ x 2⅞
Special Collection Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

Untitled (Snow and Clouds), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 7⅞ x 9⅝
Collection of Patrick Suyama

A. Kono

Perpetual Motion, 1931
Toned bromide, 12 x 10⅜
Private collection

Frank Kunishige

Aida Kawakami, c. 1927
Toned bromide, 13 x 9⅞
Special Collection Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

In the Canal, n.d.
Toned bromide, 9 x 12⅝
Special Collection Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

Untitled (Fireworks), n.d.
Toned bromide, 9⅝ x 13⅞
Special Collection Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

Untitled (Salmon), n.d.
Artatone process, 13⅞ x 10⅛
Collection of Patrick Suyama

Torazi Mayeda

Morning Glory, 1927
Toned bromide, 13¾ x 10
New Orleans Museum of Art; Museum Purchase

Untitled (Bird Over Cornfield), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 9⅝ x 7⅞
Collection of Tom Jacobson

Toyo Miyatake

Untitled (Abstract Form), 1925
Toned bromide, 8½ x 13⅞
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Untitled (Michio Ito in "Pizzicati"), 1929
Toned bromide, 13½ x 10½
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Untitled (Michio Ito in "Spring Rain"), 1929
Toned bromide, 13¼ x 10½
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Untitled (Light Study), 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅜
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Torii (Woman with Musical Instrument), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 12⅞ x 9¼
Collection of the Itani Family

Reflection from the Filament, 1931
Toned bromide, 15⅞ x 10⅞
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Untitled (Dancer Chana Kubert), 1931
Toned bromide, 10¼ x 13¼
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Wires, 1932
Silver print, 8½ x 11½
Collection of Archie Miyatake

Squid, 1934
Toned bromide, 9⅓ x 7⅙
Collection of Archie Miyatake

T. Mukai

The Lily, 1924
Bromoil, 7⅓ x 9⅝
Private collection

Light and Shadow, c. 1927
Bromoil, 7⅙ x 9¾
Collection of Frances Nishibayashi

Kentaro Nakamura

Evening Wave, c. 1927
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅙
Private collection

Untitled (Boat at Mooring), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 10⅝ x 13¼
Collection of the Itani Family

Hideo Onishi

End of Day, c. 1924
Toned bromide, 8⅙ x 10⅙
Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Gift of Hideo Onishi

Kumezu Ota

The Wherry, 1928
Bromoil transfer, 13⅝ x 8⅓
Collection of James and Janeen Marrin

Sampan (Variant), c. 1928
Toned bromide, 7⅙ x 10⅝
Collection of James and Janeen Marrin

J.T. Sata

Untitled (Triangles and Balls), 1926
Toned bromide, 5⅓ x 8⅝
Collection of Frank T. Sata

Untitled (Portrait), 1928
Toned bromide, 9⅙ x 7⅙
Collection of Frank T. Sata

Untitled (Concrete Pipes and Shadows), 1929
Toned bromide, 8¼ x 10¼
Collection of Frank T. Sata

Untitled (Ice Cream Cones), 1930
Toned bromide, 6⅙ x 7⅓
Collection of Frank T. Sata

Untitled (Bridge), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 7¾ x 11¼
Collection of Frank T. Sata

Untitled (Man Walking), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 8⅙ x 10¼
Collection of Frank T. Sata

F.Y. Sato

The Nagashi (or The Shamisen Player), c. 1934
Bromide print using paper negative, 13¼ x 10⅝
Collection of Tom Jacobson

H.K. Shigeta

Fantasy, c. 1930
Toned bromide print using combination negative, 13⅝ x 7⅙
Private collection

Kaye Shimojima

Dusty Trail, c. 1927
Toned bromide, 14⅜ x 17⅝
Collection of Graham Nash

Edge of Pond, c. 1928
Toned bromide, 15⅝ x 10⅙
Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Gift of Karl Struss

T.K. Shindo

Parasol Geta, c. 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅙
Collection of Togo Tanaka

Still Life (Noh Mask and Helmet), c. 1930
Gold-toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅙
Private collection

Untitled (Close-Up of Flower Form), c. 1930
Bromide, 13⅙ x 10⅙
Collection of Togo Tanaka

Untitled (Flowers), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅙
Collection of the Itani Family

Untitled (Still Life with Bell Pepper), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 10⅓ x 13⅝
Collection of Togo Tanaka

Untitled (Water Lily), c. 1930
Carbon, 13 x 10
Private collection

Dragonfly, c. 1933
Bromide, 13⅙ x 10⅝
Private collection

T.K. Shindo (attributed to)

Untitled (Water Abstract), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 12 x 9⅝
Collection of the Itani Family

Dr. Henry Moriya Takahashi

Untitled (Two Men on Shipdeck), c. 1935
Bromide, 10⅝ x 13⅙
Collection of Tom Jacobson

Kango Takamura

Setsu, c. 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 9⅝
Collection of Kango Takamura

I.K. Tanaka

Asa Giri, 1930
Toned bromide, 9⅓ x 12⅓
Collection of Sadao Kimura

Shigemi Uyeda

Reflections on the Oil Ditch, c. 1925
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅙
Private collection

Untitled (Boat Docking with Life Savers), c. 1925
Toned bromide, 8⅙ x 10⅝
Private collection

Untitled (Lobster Abstract), c. 1925
Toned bromide, 6¼ x 8⅝
Private collection

Untitled (Men and Women on Boat), c. 1925
Toned bromide, 7⅙ x 9⅝
Private collection

Untitled (Water Lily), c. 1925
Toned bromide, 10⅙ x 12⅙
Private collection

Untitled (Lord Asano Park, Hiroshima—Asano Sensui), c. 1928
Toned bromide, 6⅓ x 9⅝
Collection of the Uyeda Family

R.M. Yaginuma

Untitled (Boats), c. 1930
Toned bromide, 13⅝ x 10⅝
Collection of the Itani Family

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